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SUBJECT: DELHI DIARY, JANUARY 2-9, 2009

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¶1. (U) Below is a compilation of political highlights from Embassy New Delhi for January 2-9, 2009, that did not feature in our other reporting, including:

- J&K: Omar Abdullah Sworn-In as Chief Minister
- PDP Pulls out of UPA Coalition
- Shootout in Poonch
- UAE Naval Commander Visits India, Sign of "Long-standing" Relations
- United Revolutionary Front of Bhutan Kills Four in IED Attack
- BJP Sounds Bugle for National Polls

J&K: Omar Abdullah Sworn-In as Chief Minister
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¶2. (U) Omar Abdullah, a 1998 IVLP participant, officially became the Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir on January 5. At thirty-eight, Abdullah is the state's youngest-ever Chief Minister. His National Conference party heads a coalition government with the Congress Party after winning a plurality of seats in the recent state assembly elections, which were marked by few disruptions and an historically high, 62 percent voter turnout (Reftel). Foreign Minister Mukherjee and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi attended the Srinagar ceremony. Commenting after the ceremony on the long-standing dispute between GOI and separatists in Jammu and Kashmir, Abdullah told reporters, "My party will do whatever it can to facilitate a dialogue with New Delhi and the separatists. It has happened in the past, and I see no reason why it can't happen in the future."

PDP Pulls out of UPA Coalition

¶3. (U) In the aftermath of the Congress Party's alliance with the National Conference (NC) party in Jammu and Kashmir, former state-level coalition partner, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), on January 4 formally decided to pull out of its six-year alliance with the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The decision was conveyed by PDP president Mehbooba Mufti in a communique to UPA Chairperson Sonia

Gandhi. Congress officials said that the PDP decision to part ways was "unfortunate" as they could have continued to support the UPA while in opposition on the state-level.

14. (U) The Congress Party entered into a coalition with the PDP in 2002, but their ties were severed in June last year over the Amarnath land controversy. Congress played "kingmaker" on December 30, joining hands with the NC to form a coalition government (Reftel). The NC won 28 seats and the Congress 17 seats in the seven-phase state assembly election last year, giving both parties enough seats to govern in the 87 seat assembly. 38-year-old NC leader Omar Abdullah was sworn in as Chief Minister of J&K on January 5.

Shootout in Poonch

15. (U) Fighting between suspected Muslim militants and Indian troops in a forested area of J&K resumed on January 4 and has continued to date, claiming seven lives including three security personnel. The violence, close to the line of control, began on Thursday when Indian troops attacked suspected militant hideouts in the Batidhar forest area, Poonch district of J&K. Indian press has reported that up to ten suspected militants from three prominent Muslim militant groups are in hiding in the area.

16. (U) The Batidhar encounter is one of the longest skirmishes in recent months, and the first since legislative elections in November and December last year. The elections

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saw over 60-percent turnout despite a boycott call by Kashmiri separatists (Reftel).

UAE Naval Commander Visits India, Sign of "Long-standing" Relations

17. (SBU) UAE Naval Commander Rear Admiral Ahmed Mohammed Al-Sabab began his three-day trip to India on January 6. During his three-day visit he traveled to New Delhi and Mumbai. According to Professor of West Asian Studies Qamar Agha of Jamia Millia University in New Delhi, Al-Sabab's visit is a normal, predictable component of long-standing cooperation between India and the UAE on defense and economic matters, but takes on special weight in the aftermath of Mumbai. It has been widely reported that Al-Sabab received his education in Pakistan. Given his close ties to Pakistan, there is media speculation that Al-Sabab provide the GOI special insight into the Mumbai attacks.

18. (SBU) Agha said that the UAE and other Gulf countries are "deeply disturbed by the crisis in Pakistan," where they have strong ties, and they are "praying for peace" with Pakistan and India. He indicated that the Gulf countries are especially worried because, due to the financial crisis will restrict their ability to finance Pakistan. In addition, Agha believes that the Indian and UAE Navies are interested in developing a joint naval strategy on counter-terrorism and counter-piracy in the waters off of the Horn of Africa, but said that MEA's thinking on the topic may differ from the Navy's.

United Revolutionary Front of Bhutan Kills Four in IED Attack

19. (U) On December 30, United Revolutionary Front of Bhutan (URFB) rebels attacked a group of forest workers in the Sarpang district of southern Bhutan. The rebels had planted an improvised explosive device on the road, which was triggered by the forest workers' tractor. After the explosion, the gunmen opened fire on the workers and set ablaze the bodies using the tractor tires. The attack killed four forest workers, while two others managed to escape. Media outlets reported that the rebels stole two SLR rifles

with 40 rounds of ammunition from the workers.

¶10. (U) The URFB, reportedly the Nepal-based Communist Party of Bhutan's militant wing, immediately claimed responsibility for the attack and sent a press release to journalists and diplomatic missions in India and Nepal. The statement also noted that the underground organization carried out serial bomb blasts in Thimphu, Chukha, Dagana, and Samachi in the run up to the National Assembly elections last spring. Accusing Prime Minister Thinley's government of continuing its "iron rule," the URFB threatened to "escalate" the violence if the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) government continued to "turn a deaf ear to peace and reconciliation."

¶11. (SBU) Ravi Nair, Director of the South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre and close embassy contact, reported that the URFB had remained quiet since last year's election. His contacts reported that the current URFB leader is Ramesh Subba (Note: the December 31 URFB press release was signed "Karma, Commander-in-Chief." Nair believes the name is an alias. End Note). The group fights for the rights of the predominantly Hindu Bhutanese in the south and for the repatriation of Bhutanese refugees residing in camps in Nepal.

¶12. (SBU) In response, the RGOB announced the formation of an elite police force, similar to India's National Security Guards. Royal Bhutan Police Chief Colonel Kipchu Namgyel stated that the unit will be formed under the "Special Reserve Police Force" of the Police Bill and will initially

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recruit 178 guards.

BJP Sounds Bugle for National Polls

¶13. (U) Following state assembly election defeats in Delhi and Rajasthan last month, the BJP resumed preparations on January 2 for upcoming Lok Sabha elections due by May this year. The BJP's central election committee announced its planning schedule -- January 19-21 and 28-29 -- to discuss party electoral strategy and to finalize its list of candidates. In addition, the committee will host local "booth-level" meetings in all electoral districts starting January 16 to invigorate party machinery ahead of national elections.

¶14. (U) The BJP has already released the names of 19 candidates. These include its Prime Ministerial hopeful L.K. Advani, party president Rajnath Singh, former UP chief minister Kalyan Singh, cricketer-turned-TV personality Navjot Singh Sidhu, Khiren Rijiju, Tapir Gao, and former Union ministers Murli Manohar Joshi, Santosh Gangwar, Ashok Pradhan, Vinod Khanna, Maneka Gandhi and her son Varun.

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